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Documenting Cultural and Historical Memory: Oral History in the National Park Service

by Janet A. McDonnell

Abstract "Documenting Cultural and Historical Memory: Oral History in the National Park Service" provides an over- view and assessment of the current state of oral history projects and programs within the National Park Service. Oral history has long been a particularly valuable xesource and tool for the Park Service in preserving cultural and historical memory. Its rangers, interpreters, historians, archaeologists, ethnographers, and cultural landscape specialists use oral history to document the history of individual parks, as well as the events and people the parks commemorate. They use oral history to create inter- pretive exhibits, movies, and videos and to record perspectives on major events, figures, and movements. The Service initiates and manages a large number of unique and significant oral his- tory projects and programs. However, too often the value of its oral history projects and collections has been diminished be- cause of funding shortages, poor equipment, insufficient train- ing, inadequate preservation measures, or other problems.

The National Park Service has a unique and important role in documenting and preserving the nation's cultural and histori- cal memory. Since the establishment of the Park Service in 1916, its primary mission has been to conserve park natural and

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cultural resources and to make those resources available to the public. Oral history is uniquely suited to that mission and is directly linked to the missions of many of the 388 parks in the National Park System. In its recent report on the role of national parks in the 21st Century, the National Park System Advisory Board observed that the parks were "places to stimu- late an understanding of history in its larger context."l At a Park Service conference in 2000, renowned scholar and hist()- rian John Hope Franklin, chair of the Advisory Board, empha- sized the important role that the national parks playas places where Visitors can hear about important, complex subjects, such as the struggle for racial justice, women's rights, and the rights of workers. The Service, he said, had a unique opportunity to teach "in real places about real history and real nature with real things."2 What better way to make history "real" than to allow people to recount their experiences in their own words.

Oral history has long been a particularly valuable resource and tool within the Service for preserving cultural and histori- cal memory. Park Service rangers, interpreters, historians, archaeologists, ethnographers, and cultural landscape special- ists use oral history to document the history of individual parks, as well as the events and people the parks commemorate. They use it to document the lives and cultures of the people associated with the parks and to provide important information about properties and structures within park boundaries.

The size and scope of the oral history collections and projects within the Service vary tremendously. There are large, well- established collections and projects such as the Ellis Island Oral History Project with nearly 2,000 interviews, as well as small collections with fewer than a dozen tapes. A few programs, such as the one at San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park, date back to the 1940s or 1950s and are among the longest- running oral history programs in the nation.

The Service's projects and collections are remarkable in

1 National Park System Advisory Board, *National Park Service Advisory Report* 2001: *Rethinking National Parks tor the 21st Century* (National Park Service, August 2001),7.
2 Janet A. McDonnell, "The National Park Service Looks Toward the 21st Century: The 1988 General Superintendents Conference and Discovery 2000" (Office of the Chief Historian, National Park Service, January 2000),23.

their diversity and uniqueness. For example, War in the Pacific National Historical Park in Guam uses oral history to docu- ment the personal experiences of individuals involved in the Pacific Theater during World War II. Park volunteers and con- tractors interview Japanese veterans who served on Guam about their experiences and provide the park with a rare Japa- nese perspective of the war. The oral history collection at Steam- town National Historic Site in Pennsylvania includes interviews with individuals who were associated with steam era railroad- ing in the Northeast and the railroad preservation movement. At Homestead National Monument of America in Nebraska, a memorial to the pioneers who settled the American West, the staff conducts interviews related to the homesteading experi- ence. The project includes an interview in Alaska with the last American homesteader. Point Reyes National Seashore in Cal- ifornia uses interviews to document the regional cattle ranching industry.3

With increasing frequency, parks use oral history to support their interpretive programs and to create interpretive products such as exhibits, movies, and videos in visitor centers and muse- ums. Oral history is a particularly useful tool for parks that commemorate relatively recent events, where witnesses are still living. Park interpreters recognize that statements of actual par- ticipants in a historical event bring realism and immediacy to a historic site or a collection of artifacts. As a staff member at Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park in Alaska explained, "only those stories from the participants can really bring history alive."4

Oral history is also a valuable resource for writing the histo- ries of individual parks and the history of the National Park Service as a federal agency. Interviews with current and former park employees, park neighbors, policymakers, and program

3 Much of the infonnation throughout this paper concerning specific park oral his- tory projects and collections comes from the oral history survey questionnaires sub- mitted in July 2001 by individual parks. See also, Janet A. McDonnell and Corinne Weible, "Oral History in the National Park Service" (Office of the Chief Historian, National Park Service, January 2002). The questionnaires and the report are on file in the Office of the Chief Historian in Washington, D.C.
4 Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park oral history survey questionnaire, July 2001.

managers provide rich source material for these histories. Senior Park Service historian Dr. Richard Sellars, for example, con- ducted over two dozen interviews with planners and policy- makers within and outside the Service to support his landmark history of natural resources in the national parks, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History.5* Oral histories also pro- vide important source material for historic resource studies, such as the one at Manzanar World War II Relocation Camp National Historic Site in eastern California-a site devoted to protecting and interpreting the cultural, historic, and natural resources associated with the relocation and internment of Jap- anese Americans during the war.

Parks use oral history to record various perspectives on major events, such as the attack on Pearl Harbor, and to gain further insights on well- known figures such as Dwight D. Eisenhower, Carl Sandburg, Orville and Wilbur Wright, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. They also use it to broaden our understanding of some of the most important movements in American history such as immigration, civil rights, and women's rights. Sometimes inter- views provide parks with their only source of information about a particular event, site, or individual. Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve, lying north of the Arctic Circle, for example, conducted oral history interviews with native Alaskan elders to document1he last caribou hunt conducted from kayaks in Little Chandler Lake.

Service ethnographers, archaeologists, and cultural land- scape specialists use oral history to collect individual life histo- ries and migration histories, as well as histories of communities and of tribal settlement. They use it to document and interpret the traditional uses of particular objects and artifacts, to get information about the changing uses of a specific landscape, and to locate demolished buildings.

In their pamphlet, *Using Oral History in Community His- tory Projects,* Laurie Mercier and Madeline Buckendorf observed, "By giving voice to people not included in the usual historical sources, oral history can provide a fuller, more hon- est picture of the past by answering the hows and whys of

5 **Richard West Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History* (New Haven: Yale University, 1997).**

human action."6 Parks increasingly use oral history to give voice to those who have been silenced or ignored, such as women, minorities, and immigrants. In some instances, projects address painful subjects such as discrimination, segregation, and dis- enfranchisement.

George Washington Carver National Monument, Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site, and Nicodemus National His- toric Site are just a few of the parks that use oral history to record the contributions and experiences of African-AmericaIi leaders and communities. George Washington Carver National Monument in Missouri, Carver's birthplace and childhood home, started an oral history project in the 1950s to help tell the story of George Washington Carver and the surrounding area in southwestern Missouri in the 1870s.. Many of the interviews were with individuals who knew Carver in his formative years. Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site in Virginia commemo- rates the life and contributions of Maggie Lee Walker, a promi- nent African-American community leader and one of the first women to establish a bank and serve as its president. The park has documented the history of the local African-American com- munity by interviewing former employees and residents and descendents of African-American slaves. At Nicodemus National Historic Site in Nicodemus, Kansas, the only remaining western town established by African Americans during the Reconstruc- tion period, oral history has supported cultural landscape and historic structures reports

and a Historic American Buildings Survey.

Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site commemorates the 1954 landmark Supreme Court decision ending legal racial segregation in the nation's public schools. The park conducts oral history primarily to support its inter- pretive programs at Monroe school, the segregated school attended by the plaintiff's daughter in Topeka, Kansas. Inter- views relate to the history and development of the site and the associated cultural resources in Topeka. The park recently completed a series of interviews with plaintiffs in

6 Laurie Mercier and Madeline Buckendorf, *Using Oral History in Community His tory Projects* (Oral History Association Pamphlet Series #4, Oral History Associa tion, 1992), ii.

the Brown case, to include interviews in South Carolina, Vir- ginia, Delaware, New York, New Jersey, and the District of Columbia.

Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site in Alabama pre- serves the airfield, historic hangar, and other buildings at Moton Field, where the first African-American military aviators known as the Thskegee Airmen received their initial flight training during World War II. Historians and ethnographers interview pilots, flight instructors, administrators, mechanics, nurses, secretaries, and wives who participated in the Tuskegee Airmen experience. This allows the airmen, their families, and others to explain their history in their own words. Park Service staff will use the information to help guide the rehabilitation of historic Moton Field and to support interpretation in a planned museum.

Other park projects focus on women and immigrants. At Lowell National Historical Park in Massachusetts, staff mem- bers use oral history to document the changing structure of the post-World War II textile industry in Lowell and the impact of those changes on workers, managers, and the local community. They also record the experiences and contributions of the immigrant workforce and female textile workers. The Ellis Island Oral History Project, housed in the Ellis Island Immigra- tion Museum, is dedicated to preserving the first-hand recollec- tions of immigrants coming to America between 1892 and 1954 when Ellis Island was in operation. The interviews examine everyday life in the immigrants' countries of origin, their family histories, reasons for coming to America, experiences on the ship, processing at the Ellis Island facility, and adjustment to living in the United States.

Some of the World War lI-related sites use oral history to incorporate more diverse perspectives. The new Rosie the Riveter-World War II Home Front National Historical Park in Oakland, California, established to commemorate those who supported the war effort, already uses oral history for park planning, cultural resource studies, administrative history, and interpretive programs. Interviews provide valuable information about the home front experience, the role of women and minor- ities in the war industries, and the structures and functions of the Oakland shipyard. The USS *Arizona* Memorial in Hawaii accumulated hundreds of video and audiotapes that record the
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perspectives of those who witnessed the attack on Pearl Har- bor, to include military personnel and civilians from both sides.

At the National Park of American Samoa, oral history is an invaluable tool for preserving the history of Samoan natives. Samoan history for the most part is still retained only in the oral tradition, such as legends, songs, and speeches, and much of this history is being lost. In 1997 the park began systemati- cally interviewing residents between the ages of 55 and 95 in nine villages to help preserve this history. As one staff member explained, "The power of oral tradition and history are well embedded in the minds of the elders in the culture. It is for a fact that once an elder of a culture dies; their story dies with them."7

Among one of the most technologically advanced projects is PROJECT JUKEBOX at Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve in Alaska. The project, initiated in 1991, is a coopera- tive effort between the Service and the University of Alaska to document the lives of the people associated with the preserve to include local residents, trappers, hunters, miners, as well as Ser- vice planners and managers. The web-based project includes oral histories, transcripts, photographs, maps, and other resources. The tapes have been converted to a digital format and saved on com- pact disks. Staff, visitors, and researchers use a computer work- station to select topics and pull up recordings, transcripts, and illustrations at their own speed. Unfortunately, fewer than 20 percent of the interviews have been transcribed because of lack of funding, staff time, and management support. There is a sim- ilar PROJECT JUKEBOX at. Gates of the Arctic that includes interviews with residents of villages in and near the park, trap- pers, hunters, and park staff. Oral history is not a part of the annual budget in either park, and dedicated employees some- times conduct the interviews on their own time, at their own expense.8

Although oral history often plays an important role in the National Park Service and is an invaluable tool in preserving

7 National Park of American Samoa oral history survey questionnaire, July 2001.
8 Yukon-Charley Rivers Preserve National Preserve oral history survey question- naire, July 2001; Gates of the Arctic National Preserve oral history survey question- naire, July 2001; Donald L. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (New York: 1\J,-ayne Publishers, 1995), 205-206.

cultural and historical memory, its practice and use have been limited. At present, oral history in the Service seldom reaches its full potential. Oral history efforts are often loosely structured, sporadic, and implemented in a piecemeal fashion. Projects are often launched in response to immediate needs, rather than as part of an overall objective or plan.

In response to a recent survey of oral history throughout the National Park System, many parks expressed great interest in improving their oral history programs, but indicated that they lacked the necessary resources to do so. They spoke pas- sionately and at length about the wealth of untapped resources available, as well as their "race against time" to collect them. They reported that limited resources prevent them from gather- ing what one park employee called "this incredible resource."9 Sadly, one park after another cited instances of important inter- view candidates

passing away before they could be interviewed.

Despite the importance and urgency of some interviews, parks staffs have often found it very difficult to obtain recogni- tion for oral history as both a legitimate historical resource and a management priority. Perhaps because of its low priority among Service managers, the practice of oral history in the Ser- vice suffers from a severe funding shortage. Often these fund- ing shortages are directly linked to problems with inadequate equipment, tape processing and preservation, training, and staff availability. Many parks reported that the absence or shortage of funding was a "constant concern" and "significant constraint" on their projects and programs. Few parks designate funding for oral history on an ongoing annual basis, and many have no funding at all for oral history. In some parks, oral history is considered part of the duties of the historian or other staff members to be squeezed in when possible; other parks rely on grants, donations, and volunteers to fund and implement their oral history projects.

A few parks have demonstrated great initiative and creativ- ity in securing funds from park associations, academic institu- tions, and other private sources. For example, Harry S Truman National Historic Site was able to digitize half of the transcripts in its collection through a cooperative effort with Middle

9 North Cascades National Park oral history survey questionnaire, July 2001

Tennessee State University.Denali National Park and National Preserve has a cooperative oral history project with the univer- sity of Alaska at Fairbanks to document the Service's manage- ment of mountaineering at Mount Mc~inley.

Related to the challenges posed by funding shortages, park staffs often have little knowledge, experience, or training in the practice and use of oral history. Training opportunities are lim- ited. Often the only training consists of a single park employee attending a particular oral history conference or workshop.

Appropriate recording equipment, like training, has a great affect on the quality and usefulness of interviews, but often the quality of the equipment suffers from funding limitations and from a lack of foresight. Although some parks use professional quality recording equipment and one park even has a profes- sional recording studio, others rely on inexpensive hand held cassette recorders. Too often the use of inexpensive recording equipment has limited future uses of oral history interviews.

While the majority of parks have adopted some sort of guidelines or standards for conducting, preserving, and using oral history, as with equipment, there is great inconsistency. Roughly a quarter of the parks that responded to the recent survey reported that they used the existing Park Service guide- lines.1° These 1984 guidelines are cumbersome and dated, par- ticularly the sections related to legal issues and new technolo- gies. A slightly smaller percentage of parks indicated that they used the Oral History Association 's standards and guidelines. Roughly 10 percent of them, however, reported that they did not use any guidelines or standards at all.

Many parks described the difficulty of operating with limited staff and, in some cases, without a historian or cultural resources specialist. Oral history is just one of the already weighty and complex responsibilities faced by limited park staff and is often not considered a priority. Parks have coped with staff limita- tions in some creative ways. War in the Pacific National Historical Park, American Memorial Park, and Lowell National Histori- cal Park, all with fairly dependable outside funding sources, use

10 Blair Hubbard, Heather Huyck, and David Nathanson, "Collecting, Using and Preserving Oral History in the National Park Service" (Harpers Ferry, wv: Harpers Ferry Center, National Park Service, 1984).

or plan to u~e contracts for interviewing and tape transcription. Other parks have been able to find limited assistance from larger parks with well-established programs.

Some parks have helped ease the problems of staffing and funding shortfalls by sharing resources and information and establishing partnerships. These parks reported that they have received guidance and resources (release forms, equipment, etc.) from other parks and from outside the Service. Some parks have also formed cooperative agreements with academic insti- tutions, professional organizations, or other parks in order to aid their oral history programs. But there is a need for much more information sharing within the Service and with profes- sional organizations.

As with the other aspects of oral history, many parks reported that their efforts to process and preserve tapes were hampered by the lack of resources. Despite the widely recog- nized importance of transcribing oral history interview tapes, transcription has remained a fairly low priority within the Ser- vice. Tape transcription is often the first element of an oral his- tory project to suffer when funding or staff time becomes scarce. The Service's oral history tapes and transcripts are supposed to be accessioned and catalogued as museum property under pro- cedures outlined by the Service's museum program. The short- age of staff time and funding, however, means that many oral history interviews and collections often are not properly cata- logued and finding aids are rarely produced. Not surprisingly, preservation treatment is minimal.

Most parks give researchers unrestricted ~ccess to their col- lections. But without finding aids, indexes, or catalogues, a researcher would have great difficulty locating and using the tapes and transcripts. Moreover, while most parks open up their oral history collections to researchers, very few do anything to publicize those collections. The park oral history collections contain a wealth of material that would be of great interest to researchers and scholars from within and outside the Service, if these collections were better publicized.

It is widely recognized that documenting cultural and his- torical memory pose unique challenges. Interviewees confuse dates, telescope time, and rearrange their memories. They for- get names, places, and other details; they are not always candid
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about mistakes or problems. Some interviewees understand- ably are reluctant to discuss sensitive, controversial, or painful issues. Yet, for the National Park Service, the most pressing challenges seem to be the more practical ones related to fund- ing, staffing, training, equipment, and tape

preservation.

Although the Service has some truly superb oral history projects and collections, remarkable for their breadth and uniqueness, there are serious weaknesses. Oral history in the Service is presently an inconsistent, poorly supported endeavor that frequently faces great difficulty in producing useful and lasting historical resources. There is currently no Service-wide oral history program; oral history practices and procedures vary widely from park to park.

It is clear that oral history fills many varied needs in the Service and has often been conducted and used with great suc- cess, but it also has afar greater potential than is currently being met. Although many parks have valuable collections of interviews, their worth has too often been lessened because the tapes are of poor sound quality, untranscribed, missing release forms, poorly preserved, or because the interviewers lacked sufficient training and experience. Continuing to regard oral history as a low priority will almost certainly lead to the loss of irreplaceable resources.

While Service leaders might often be slow to give oral his- tory the priority it deserves, park staffs continue to make great efforts to record and preserve the voices of the past.